

Interview with
Bard McAllister
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I have been hired by the Friends Service Comm~~mittee~~tee social and industrial committee of this area to do a study of the seasonal farm labor problem. I have been working on this for about a year and a half. Some of the things that I have found out are as follows: about 30 per cent of the population of this county, Tulare County, will indicate as its usual occupation agricultural labor. This 30 per cent produces 90 per cent of the county's wealth. This is a heavily rural county, these persons are mainly Anglos and Negroes from Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana, there are some Spanish speaking in this area but not too many. These people I am talking about are not what you would call migrants they have permanent homes here and would like to stay and work here all year round. Mostly they live in unincorporated settlements what are sometimes called 'shack towns' or shoestring communitities; on the map here I have indicated where they are located. There are something like 300 (?) of these settlements scattered throughout the county each having five or more families. These shack-towns are generally pretty badly off as far as the usually community services are concerned. For police protection they have to depend on the Sheriff's office and the car may come out from the Sheriff's office once or twice a week, something like that. Many of these communities are five miles or more from the nearest fire station, so you could say, in effect, ~~that~~ that they do not have fire protection. When one of their shanties catches fire, if it takes the firemen ten minutes to get there that shanty is going to be burnt to the ground. As far as public health is concerned practically all these dwellings are on their own. They have their own wells for water and they have their own cess-pools or privies.

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One of my principle activities since I have been doing this has been to try to get this people organized and to arrange for community water supplies which can be safeguarded as far as health hazards are concerned.

I have ~~been~~ not had any direct dealings with the braceros in the county partly because I have never been able to discipline myself to learn Spanish, but I have heard a good deal about the Bracero Program and I have seen a good deal about how it works and how it influences the lives of these Anglos and Negroes. At the present time there are about 2,000 nationals in the county, most of them picking olives. At the same time there is some unemployment among the domestic workers but not too much at this time of year. This is the cotton season and picking cotton is the kind of work that most of these domestics prefer; it is what they have done all their lives. In the winter time the number of braceros may go down to 15 at one point, but I sstate without any hesitation that that is 15 too many because at that particular time of year there are thousands of local farm workers unemployed. I get these figures from a friend of mine who works in the Farm Placement Service in Visalia. There have been many times when I have phoned that office and tried to get statistics like this when my friend wasn't there and on those occasions I have been refused the information I was seeking.

There are a number of reasons why the growers are able to continue using national even while there is unemployment among the domestics, probably the main one is that the domesticx workers don't know their rights. You and I may know what the law says about the use of Mexican-Nationals but these people from the southern plain states have never heard of the law, so here is the way it works: A domestic will go to a farm where he may have worked the year before and he will ask for his old job picking oranges or whatever it might be; the farmer will say to him "Sorry, but

I am using only nationals this year." The man will go to another farm and he will be told the same thing and he will keep doing this until he gets discouraged and gives up, he figures there is no chance for him if the growers he knows personally can't use him. He is unaware that if he went to the Farm Placement Office in Visalia and asked there for a job picking oranges, that if there was a single national picking oranges in the county according to the law that domestic would have to be given a job even if it meant that single national had to be sent home to Mexico. But the vast majority of the domestics don't go through the Farm Labor office or if they do what often happens is this: the people behind the desk will simply shrug and say all the jobs are filled, they won't bother to add that half of them may be filled by nationals and even if they did it probably wouldn't occur to the domestics to point out that he has the right to one of those jobs; all of this ~~fact~~ reflecting the number one point--that domestics are ignorant of their guarantees under the International Agreement.

The second point is that the domestics are unwilling or unable to assert themselves in the way that would be required for them to obtain their rights. As I have already implied the Farm Placement people are not going to lift a finger to help the domestic worker, which is understandable enough since kicking out a Mexican-National who has already been certified by the Farm Placement Service would require a great deal of paper work and a great deal of explanation--some of which might be a bit embarrassing. So what is going to be required is that the domestic make himself a little obnoxious. He may have to create quite a scene in the Farm Placement office before he gets what is coming to him. When the man behind the desk says there are no jobs available the domestic is going to have to say "Don't hand me that, stuff, Mac, I know there are jobs on such and such a ranch because I see nationals working in those

orchards every morning. I know my rights and I want my rights. I want one of those jobs and if you don't fix me up with one I'll go to your superior." Well now, if you have had any dealings with these domestic workers you will realize how far-fetched a scene would be. These Anglos and Negroes, particularly the Negroes, are extremely unsure of themselves. ~~xx~~ They're extremely docile, this is the way they have been brought up; it is the only way they have been able to survive. They don't want to get the reputation of being a troublemaker because in their experience this has only led to grief. So, this is the second point--even when they know their rights they may not stick up for them because they are afraid of the consequences.

The third point is one that I have heard over and over again in ~~with~~ talking with these domestic workers who are unemployed while there are nationals employed often right across the road. I'll point out what the law says, and many of these domestics have said to me, "Hell, Mr. McAllister, I could never do what you are suggesting. Those fellows have wives and families too, they're probably worse off than my own family. I could never boot them out of their job." This sort of compassion speaks well in a sense for the character of the domestic farm worker, but at the same time it compounds the problem of chronic unemployment.

In a very few cases I suppose that the growers are within the letter of the law in using nationals even when there are locals unemployed. An orange grower, for example, may require as one of the qualifications of his pickers that they be willing to get up at 2 o'clock in the morning to light smudge pots during the cold weather. Domestics may be unable to meet this qualification, so the farmer is permitted to bring in nationals who are willing to do absolutely anything.

It goes almost without saying that the displacement of domestic workers by braceros adds substantially to the number of people on the county relief rolls. ~~was~~ You would think that this would be a situation which many taxpayers would complain about. Well, the fact of the matter is that they don't. Most of the taxpayers in the county, of course, are farmers or directly dependent upon farming, and I have never been able to get one of them to admit that the Bracero Program is adding to the tax burden. I guess they are happy with the present system because they figure they are saving more in using this cheap labor than they are having to pay out in the higher taxes. The Board of Supervisors of the county which, of course, are the ones who have to allocate money for relief and have to set the tax rates and so forth, are all farmers; so naturally no complaints are coming from them. As far as the townspeople are ~~x~~ concerned you hear no complaints from them and I will tell you the reason on the basis of my many contacts throughout the county: I would say that fully 90 per cent of the people living in the towns and cities know nothing about the Bracero Program. Oh, they may be aware that there are Mexican-Nationals in the county, but beyond that they know nothing about the way the program operates. They have no idea of how many nationals are in the area; they have no idea whether they are here legally or illegally. This is something I have come up against time after time-- a basic confusion between wetbacks and braceros.

It would seem that the way out of all this is to get the domestic workers organized so that they can go where needed in the numbers needed to harvest seasonal crops, and at the same time to put them into a position where they can bargain on an equal footing with the big growers. Ernesto Galarza claims that if the nationals were removed from the scene he could have the domestic~~x~~ workers organized within a ~~f~~ matter of months. Now I

respect Dr. Galarza and I realize that he has been working in this field many years longer than I have, but I simply cannot agree with him. Given the raw materials I do not see how the domestic farm labor market could be organized even if all braceros were removed. A number of obstacles would remain, the principle one being something that ~~Glar~~ Galarza never talks about but something which I cannot get away from in my contacts with the domestics and one which I think is overwhelmingly significant. I am referring to the personality characteristics of the average domestic farm laborer. These people in their present condition are unorganizable, they cannot work together even for the simplest sorts of goals. For example, I told you earlier about my efforts to get community water systems set up, this is an x immediate goal, the need for which is universally recognized; but I have had no end of trouble over one basic fact namely, that this requires working together among neighbors and this is something that in many cases they are unable to do. I suppose you might say that they are rugged individualists of the old school, you might say that they are simply showing the same kind of traits that the farmers of this area showed when they moved in here a generation ago and set up these enterprises. Well now, I may be wrong, but I look at it a little differently. These people carry this individualism to such a point and they show it under circumstances where it has decidedly bad effects for them and I have been forced to the conclusion that this personality trait is actually abnormal. I would go so far as to say that most of these people are mentally ill. I would say they are disorientated and out of touch with the realities of the situation that they're involved in and this is simply a gentler way of saying that they are mentally sick.

Consequently I am convinced that one is largely wasting one's time by putting the emphasis on immediate organization of local farm workers as being a solution to the farm problem. Incidentally I have talked with a

number of people who used to work with Galarza's union and who tried their damndest to organize these workers, but who failed in every instance and not for the reasons which are usually offered; but rather because of the nature of the people they were trying to organize. At the present time I am thinking along different lines and I am recommending them to the committee that I am responsible to that we try something quite different. I'll give you an example of an approach which I think will be quite fruitful: I have talked with lots and lots of growers in this valley, including many of the really big operators, the industrial farmers, and I have found many of them to be a long way from tyrants and sadists, and blind money grabbers that they have been pictured as in some of the literature. I have talked with many growers who are as aware of the basic problems as you or I. They know that they've got a tiger by the tail and they know that something fairly drastic has to be done unless they want to continue living on a sort of hand-to-mouth basis with patchwork solutions which don't solve anything and which have to be revamped every year at considerable expense and worry. What I am going to propose to the Friends Service Committee is that we begin by ~~sitting down with~~ groups of farmers and talking with them. I think that a lot of people may be surprised by the results.~~this~~ This ~~effort~~ ~~is~~ after all is the approach which the Friends have used with very good results in such fields as race-relations, and I think it would be foolish to ignore its possibilities here. Now ideally this is the sort of thing which I envisage as resulting from these series of conferences with farmers, If they can be persuaded to substantially raise their wages and substantially improve their working and living conditions then I think you will find there will be important changes occurring in the

make-up of the men working for them. If you treat a man as though he is only worth 75¢ an hour eventually he is going to start believing this himself, he is going to ~~start~~ be a shoddy workman without imagination, without any drive, and with these other personalitiex traits that I discussed before. But if you double this man's wages, if you pay a \$1.50 an hour, before very long, by golly, I think you will find that he revises his estimation of himself. He is going to develop some pride and he is going to develop initiative and he is going to be worth \$1.50 an hour, because he will be twice as good a workman; twice as dependable, and twice as productive as the man who is only paid 75¢. And with this change in the personality of the workers you will have a change in their organizability. When you reach the point that they have self-respect and self-confidence, then you will find the qualities which are essential if you want to organize for the purpose of collective bargaining or a municipal water system or anything else.

It might seem as though I am putting the cart ~~fx~~ before the horse. It might seem as though I am saying we have to start with the fruits of organization and that organization will follow, this I suppose is quite the reverse of the sequence that has been followed in every other industry. Well, I will accept this, I believe that you are going to have to use unique methods because the group you are dealing with in farm labor is unique. In every other industry including those which might seem to be most undesirable, such as coal mining and steel mills, I think you will find that when the organizers went in to start organizing they had to deal with the complete normal range of talents and abilities, some of course, were downtrodden and demoralized, but some of leadership caliber. Some were ready right then and there to step into roles of responsibility. ^{not} This is/the case with your farm labor population, it consists exclusively

of the ~~demoral~~ downtrodden and demoralized. Now don't misunderstand me, please. I have talked with farmers and others who feel that these people are where they are because of inborn inadequacies on their own part and that since they are inherently inferior people that they ~~are always~~ will always remain so, no matter what you may try to do with them or for them. Well, I can't agree with this at all. I think they are basically the same type of people who came out here a generation ago~~x~~ with this one big difference that those who got here first found land available and an economy which was expanding, and those who have come out more recently have not. So what we have in the farm labor population is a group in which talents and abilities have been submerged and repressed through many years of frustration and adverse ~~x~~ circumstances. Your qualities of leadership, for example, ~~lie~~ latent, they are at this point ~~mere~~ mere potentialities that are not yet ready to exploit. It is going to be a long ~~xx~~ process before these talents which I am sure exist, can be brought to the surface, and for my money this means that the job of organizing farm labor is going to take years, if not decades rather than weeks or months. Galarza seems to assume that all you have to do is come in with a leader from the outside and a plan of action and these people ~~will~~ bound to see where their interests lie and to fall into line. It just doesn't work that way.

I have a few miscellaneous observations to make which may be of interest to you. For example, I have heard that many braceros if not most, return to Mexico thoroughly disillusioned because in the final analysis they haven't been able to make any more up here than in Mexico. Their gross pay may look larger when and if they are able to get steady work, but of course, everything is much more expensive in this country; so their pay melts away and by the time they get home they find their savings are practically nil, which is what they were able to save before.

When you get to Mexico I hope you will be able to spend some time at the contracting stations at Empalhme, Chihuahua, and so forth because I have heard stories about conditions there. I have heard that a man may wait there a year before getting a ~~six~~ six ~~x~~ weeks' contract. And I heard of one case where a man died in Empalhme. They couldn't find any immediate cause of death and so they performed an autopsy, the ~~autopsy~~ autopsy showed that the stomach contained nothing but paper, this was what he had been living on, all that he had been eating while waiting for his contract.

Galarza claims that the Department of Labor, both the Federal and State, is riddled with sympathizers and front-men for the big growers. It is difficult sometimes to disbelieve this. For example, during the hearings of the Hillings' committee down in Los Angeles last spring, the executive secretary of the Friends Service Committee in Pasadena went in and sat down in the hearing room and after he had been there for some little time he realized that he had happened to sit down right next to a group of farmers' representatives. In this group was Mr. Ed Hayes, chief of the Farm Placement Service of the state of California/. My friend tells me that he amazed to overhear Mr. Hayes coaching these growers' representatives on their testimony, but this is precisely what was happening in case after case.